



OAK CREEK • MT. WHITNEY HATCHERY

HERE IS A ROUTE TO SWIFTLY SWEEP YOU FROM THE SUN-BAKED VALLEY FLOOR INTO A COOL OAK GROVE HIGH ON THE SIERRA SLOPE. BRING A PICNIC AND ENJOY THE SHADY OAKS—QUITE RARE HERE ON THE EASTERN SIDE OF THE MOUNTAINS—AND STUPENDOUS VIEWS.

What to expect: The first five miles are paved and rest is graded dirt. In winter you may encounter mud and snow. Snowplows don't clear this route, but the sun does its best!

Length: 8 miles one way.

Driving time: 20 minutes to half an hour, one way, if the road is clear.

Getting there: From Independence beginning at the traffic light in the center of town, go north 2.3 miles on U.S. 395 and turn left (west) onto Fish Hatchery Road.

Along the route: Oak Creek was called "Pea-vine Creek" in the first-ever written description of the Owens Valley. Capt. J.W. Davidson had been sent from Fort Tejon in 1859 to determine whether the natives were the culprits in a series of horse thefts. He reported that, to the contrary, the valley's residents were scrupulously ethical with regard to property—even walking for miles to return a dropped piece of equipment. But when white settlers came, conflict followed. On July 4, 1862 the military established Camp Independence on a site that is to your east as you begin the route. The soldiers made temporary shelters by digging out caves in the walls of a nearby ravine and later built adobe barracks.

"A building that would match the mountains, would last forever, and be a showplace for all time"—this was the command from a 1915 Fish and Game Commissioner that resulted in the Mount Whitney Fish Hatchery, one mile along the route. The site was donated by the people of Independence and the walls, two to three feet thick, are made of uncut granite rock gathered within a quarter mile. The state-run hatchery offers tours to the public.

Just beyond the hatchery the road forks; go right, and you will soon cross the south fork of Oak Creek. Pavement ends at a campground and the graded dirt road continues up to the north fork where it ends at a small parking area, the Baxter Pass trailhead at the edge of the John Muir Wilderness.

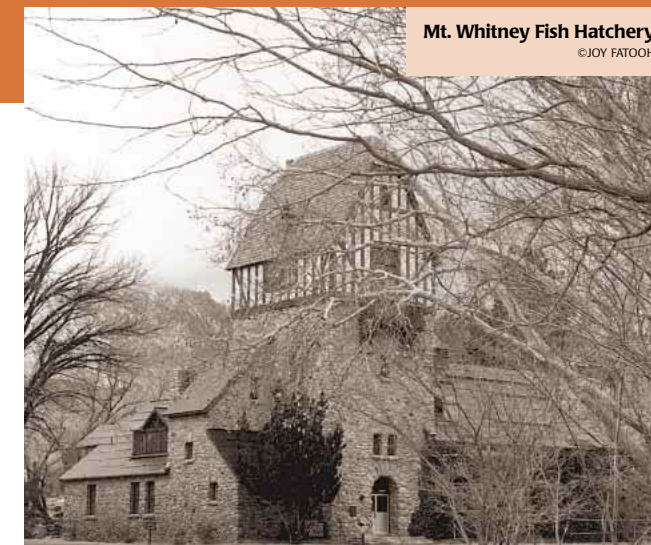
Oaks, though common on the west side of the Sierra, are a rarity here. Two species can be found along the north and south forks of Oak Creek: California black oak and interior live oak. (A third, canyon live oak, is the species most often found in other parts of the Eastern Sierra.) A few interior live oaks can be seen on the way up the road: their leaves are evergreen, a glossy dark-green year-round, with a simple oval shape and a smooth or toothed edge. The acorns are narrow and about two inches long. The large grove at the end of the road is California black oak. The leaves are much bigger, with their edges deeply lobed, and they turn yellow and fall from the tree in autumn. The acorns have a wider, oblong shape.

Fallen leaf and acorns of California black oak
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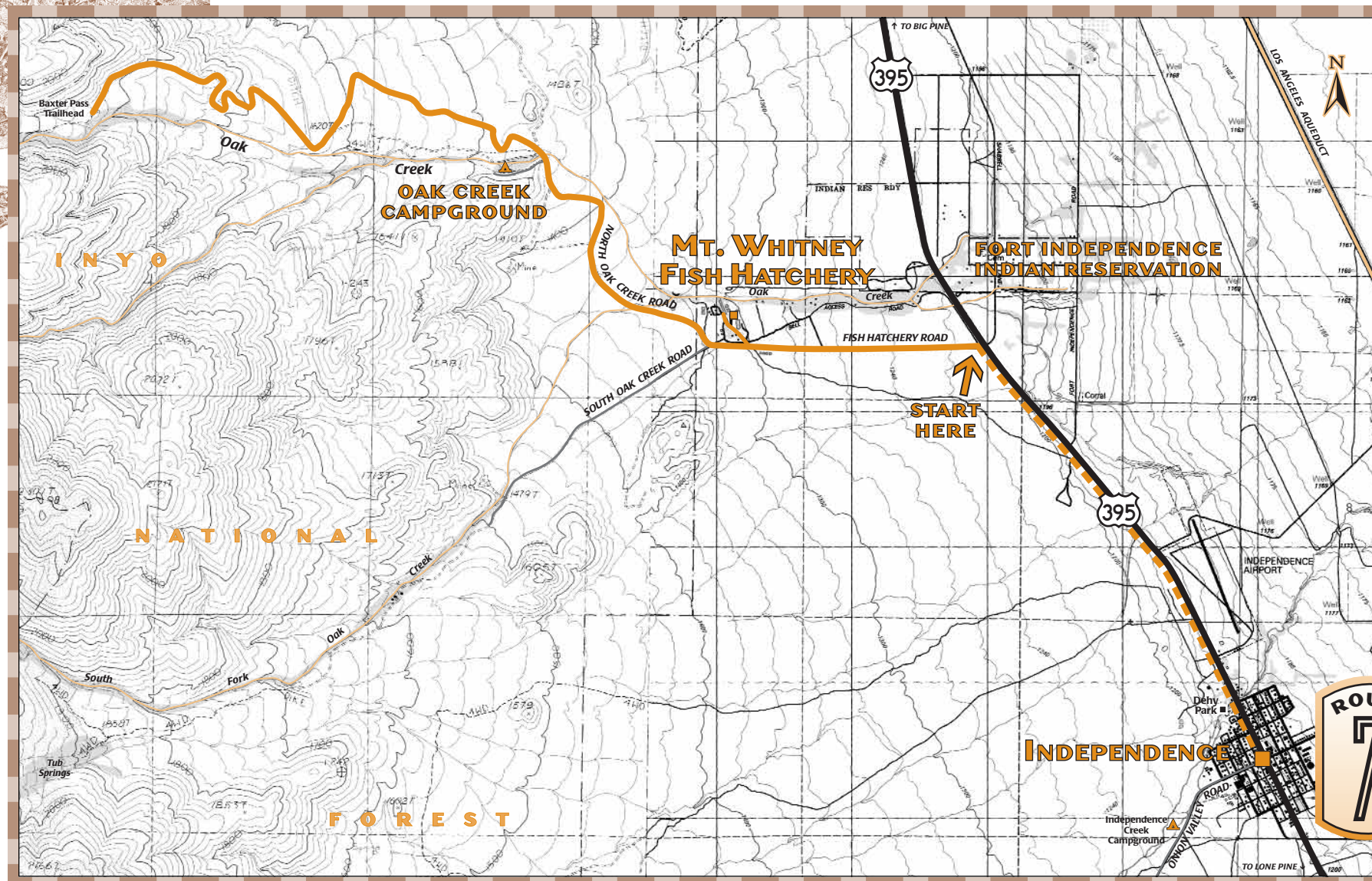
Interior live oak
©JOY FATOOH

How did these oaks get here? They were probably brought by birds. Jays, in particular, have been found to be extremely efficient at transporting acorns, gathering them for food and burying them just below the surface of the soil for future use. Researchers discovered that 50 jays transported and cached 150,000 acorns in 28 days, about 110 acorns per day for each bird.

Because the jays bury them at just the right planting depth, any cached acorn that doesn't get eaten has a good chance at sprouting and growing, having been carried some distance away from its parent oak. In this manner oaks slowly spread northward during the cooler, wetter climate of the Ice Age. The oak groves here today are Ice Age relics, persisting along cool mountain streams at the edge of their range.



Mt. Whitney Fish Hatchery
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1 0 1 2 3 Miles
SCALE

